

Summer 2013

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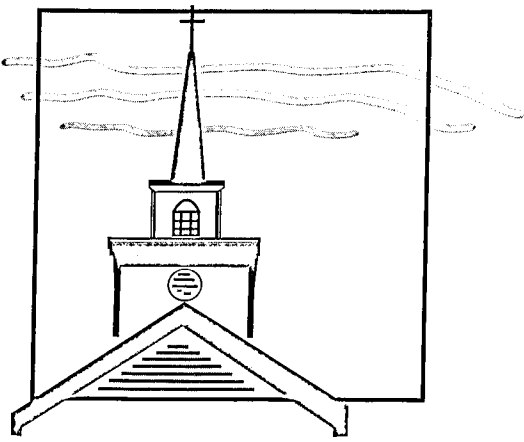
Granquist, Mark A., "The Urge to Merge" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. 32.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/32

Published Citation

Granquist, Mark Alan. "The Urge to Merge." *Lutheran Forum* 47, no. 2 (2013): 20–23.

THE URGE TO MERGE

Mark A. Granquist



It is very true to say that in American Lutheranism the twentieth century was the century of merger. From dozens of Lutheran denominations in 1900, the process of merger reduced the numbers by 1988 to two major groups, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. By that point 95% of all American Lutherans were members of one or the other, with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod the largest of several much smaller Lutheran bodies. There were three major periods of merger and realignment: 1917 to 1930, the early 1960s, and 1988, all of which led to the formation of the ELCA; the LCMS and the WELS were unaffected by these developments. Looking back on the century, two questions might be asked of all this. First, why was there such a movement toward merger, and second, how did this whole process affect the course of American Lutheranism, especially but not exclusively the ELCA? To put it bluntly and directly, were all the efforts and energies expended on this process really worth it?

For much of the century, even to have ventured such a question mostly likely would have elicited scorn and derision in response. Indeed, it was taken as a generally established article of faith that merger was what God intended for His Lutheran children in North America, and that a failure to attend to these processes was contravening the will of God. Certainly there were sharp internal disagreements among Lutherans about the doctrinal and organizational paths to such a unification, but these disagreements were more about process than anything else. The vision of a single, powerful, and united North American Lutheranism was something devoutly to be wished, and its benefits seemed to be manifestly obvious. The positive effects of unification seemed so certain that few people, it appears, were asking if there were any negative consequences to the process. But now that the last big merger took place twenty-five years ago and there are no more obvious mergers on the horizon, it is time to reevaluate the unification efforts of the twentieth century.

It will be best to examine first the rhetoric surrounding the urge to merge that remained so strong through the middle of the twentieth century, then some of the possible

reasons behind the merger ideology, and finally the possible negative consequences of merger.

The merger rhetoric was forceful and nearly universal among American Lutherans, few of whom did not believe that a single, unified Lutheran church in North America would be a glorious thing. They did differ as to the nature of such a unified Lutheran church, and the means by which it might be achieved, but even the most conservative and cautious of them could be coaxed into admitting that division into separate Lutheran “silos” was certainly not fulfilling the destiny of American Lutheranism, nor was it the will of God. American Lutherans in the mid-twentieth century had finally jettisoned their immigrant languages for English, had started conversing with their Christian neighbors around them, and were moving toward the mainstream of American religious life. The massive nineteenth-century crush of immigration had slowed to a trickle, and the overwhelming need to deal with the new immigrants had subsided. It seemed that Lutherans could now lift their eyes toward a larger horizon.

The rhetoric of merger suffuses the Lutheran publications of the mid-twentieth century, and it is easy to find representative quotations to illustrate this line of thinking. Typical of such rhetoric is an article by the president of the old United Lutheran Church in America, Franklin Clark Fry, easily the best-known American Lutheran leader of his generation who was portrayed on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1958 as “Mr. Lutheran.” In the May 1949 issue of the journal *Lutheran Quarterly* (old series), as a part of a symposium entitled “Reaching Closer Relationships,” Fry delivered a stem-winding sermon about the virtues of Lutheran union in the American religious context. Beginning with the idea that American Lutherans were already in “substantial agreement” with each other, in contrast to other American Protestant groups, Fry continued, “A unified Lutheran Church in America would honor and glorify its Savior with immensely increased effectiveness through a united testimony. The impact of the true Gospel upon Protestant life and thought in this pivotal western world would be strengthened mightily.” Suggesting that each of the present groups could still maintain their distinctive

contribution to American Lutheranism within a unified Lutheran church, he concluded, "Keeping American Lutheranism frozen in its *present* divisions in these explosive, fermenting days for Christian faith cannot be in accordance with the divine will."¹ Certainly Fry was out in front of other more cautious leaders on this issue, but even they did not run counter to his course, only to his degree of enthusiasm.

Those were heady days for American Lutherans. Many had already been working together for thirty years in the National Lutheran Council, which was doing significant cooperative ministry. American Lutherans were taking the lead in the postwar reconstruction of European churches and expanding their share of mission work in Africa and Asia. They were providing leadership for the formation of the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the Lutheran World Federation. And they were starting hundreds of new mission congregations in the United States every year. Lutheran leaders dreamed of what more could be done if only American Lutherans were organizationally unified.

Many Lutheran leaders saw union as more than just a dream—it was an imperative. In his 1966 study of the history of American Lutheran union efforts, Missouri Synod leader John Tietjen posed the question of why there were so many different Lutheran synods, even at his time, and he found it difficult to answer the question of the "needling" outsider, "Why don't you Lutherans get together?" After tracing the history of American Lutheran efforts, Tietjen concluded that "Lutheran unity is not a luxury that we can have or not have depending on whether or not we want it." After citing the practical benefits of unity, overcoming the "inefficiencies and duplication of effort" inherent in division, he went on to suggest, "Even more compelling is the argument that a divided Lutheranism, like a divided Christendom, is an offense that weak-

ens our missionary message, contradicts our witness to the Christ as one who reconciles and unites, and bars some from entering the Kingdom of God."²

The mid-1960s were a golden time for Lutheran unity. Mergers in 1960 and 1962 brought the aforementioned 95% of all American Lutherans into three different denominations, and these three began cooperative efforts through the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA) in 1967. Other developments portended even greater unity, when, in a historic move, the Missouri Synod entered into altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC), a move that Missouri had rarely made. Even when Missouri conservatives wrested denominational control and started to move the Synod away from cooperation and union, this tendency seemed at the time to be only a temporary problem to overcome. Writing the conclusion to the standard history of American Lutheranism at the time, ALC professor E. Clifford Nelson was looking even beyond Lutheran unity to Lutheran ecumenical work as the next stage on the horizon. He suggested, "Lutheran unity, fifty years overdue, will come eventually because Missouri cannot forever escape the implications of its own confession."³ Lutheran unity was, it seemed to Nelson, inevitable and an integral part of the Lutheran theological identity.

The most recent forty years have not been kind to these dreams of Lutheran unity in America. Certainly there was the further merger in 1988 to create the ELCA, which brought together the ALC, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Missouri splinter group, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. But with this merger the cooperative organization LCUSA was shut down as superfluous. The Missouri Synod has not yet awakened to the "inevitability" of Lutheran union (!) and still shows every sign of pulling ever further away from the ELCA (or perhaps, more accurately, both are actively pulling away from each other).

And now the ELCA itself has undergone the largest Lutheran schism since the 1860s, with the departure first in 2001 of the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and then in 2010 the North American Lutheran Church, with a current combined strength of 1,050 congregations and 450,000 members. The ELCA is down from its initial population of 5.2 million members to a current total of around four million, which means that more than half of those who left the ELCA gave up on being Lutheran altogether. And the project of Lutheran unity seems to be dead. Ecumenical unity seems not much further behind it.

The vision of a powerful and united American Lutheranism striding across the American scene, impressive and influential, was certainly a heady goal. But there was more to the push for Lutheran unity than simply the idea that greater unity meant greater Lutheran effectiveness and efficiency. There were also powerful social, cultural, and religious forces at work in the mid-twentieth century that pushed for unity and especially for strong, centralized, institutional unity.

In America, the early- to mid-twentieth century was most certainly the era of institution-building and of the consolidation and centralization of power in massive organizations and bureaucracies. This can be seen in the tremendous growth, for example, of governmental structures on the federal, state, and local levels, which have mushroomed through the decades. But above all, this trend is seen in the formation of the inclusive American corporation, the business entity that combined large numbers of disparate commercial businesses within a single large corporate entity: General Foods, General Electric, General Dynamics, and so forth. The vision was of ever-expanding efficiencies based on scale and organization.

The mainline Protestant denominations of the twentieth century were caught up in this vision as well. It was not only the Lutherans who sought

merger and unity; actually, they were quite far behind their mainline Protestant cousins on this one. Parallel movements brought about the United Church of Christ (1957), the United Methodist Church (1968), and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (1983), among others. Even beyond this was the dramatic 1960s vision of a truly unified American Protestantism located in the Consultation on Church Union. These groups built entire centralized bureaucracies to support the vision through the National Council of Churches, located in the “Godbox” building on Riverside Drive in New York City. Centralization and consolidation were the name of the religious game as much as the business game.

Taking the cues from their surroundings, Lutherans not only moved aggressively toward merger, they also consolidated and centralized power within their own denominations, whether long-existing or newly-merged. Prior to the end of World War II, most Lutheran denominations had very little, if any, national church headquarters and national church staff beyond the president of the synod and the presidents of the regional judicatories (variously called districts, synods, or conferences). The business of the denomination was done in yearly assemblies or by gatherings of key leaders (free or reduced rail fares made this possible); for the rest of the year, the denominational president handled the work himself. In one of these denominations, the work of the national synod was located in the spare bedroom of the president’s residence, with a part-time typist to assist him! But after World War II, all the major Lutheran denominations established centralized national headquarters, with full-time staff dedicated to denominational needs. Power soon flowed to these headquarters, and they became symbols of the denominations themselves. The new question was, “What does headquarters want?” Power flowed from the top and congregations were seen as “franchises” of the national entity, there to carry out

the program as envisioned from the center. Pastors were often rewarded for their institutional loyalty or penalized for their lack of it.

Though the centralization and consolidation of religious power in the national headquarters of these newly merged churches were generally seen as a means of great efficiency and impact—which in part may have been true—there was also a darker side to much of it. As Roger Finke and Rod-

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ney Stark have shown, mainline Protestantism relied on centralized and coordinated power within twentieth-century America to monopolize public leadership and to freeze out the “disreputable sects” from a place at the public table.¹ Many of these smaller groups were conservative Protestants who had broken away from the mainline denominations during the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early twentieth century, and the mainline denominations wanted to keep them away from public prominence. This was a move to limit and sideline their competition; the words “religious monopoly” are not unwarranted here. It is not hard to see how Lutherans, who were always a decade or two behind their mainline cousins,

eagerly wanted Lutheran union so that they could take their rightful public place and not be considered “disreputable sects.” Smaller and conservative Lutheran groups were marginalized in the process of Lutheran merger so that the major Lutheran denominations could be seen as following the lead of the Protestant mainline.

Unfortunately, Lutherans completed their process of merger just as this attempted religious monopoly was falling apart after the social and religious traumas of the 1960s. American business, at least, discovered that centralization and the formation of monopolistic mega-corporations was a bad idea after all. In the last forty years business has actively sought to dismantle these enormous entities, spinning off divisions and subsidiaries, flattening and reducing layers of bureaucracy, and attempting to become much leaner organizations. What business learned was that the centralization of power and layers of bureaucracy, far from increasing their power, actually made their businesses sluggish, unresponsive to consumer needs, and unable to meet newly evolving challenges. Government and religious organizations have been much slower to learn these lessons, as institutional inertia has a strong hold on them.

On the other hand, those “disreputable sects” that the mainline sought to freeze out found their own way to power by making an end-run around the mainline denominations: consider the explosive growth of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches as contrasted with the decline of the mainline over the past forty years. In comparison to the mainline, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are much less institutionally united, much less bureaucratic, and much *more* competitive in the religious “marketplace,” able to respond effectively to the perceived religious needs of the people around them.

It remains to examine the unintended negative consequences of a century

of merger activity among Lutherans—the merger “fallout,” as it might be termed. But it must be said that these consequences were genuinely unintentional; the Lutheran leaders who pushed for merger were well-intentioned, hard-working, and faithful Christian leaders, on the whole genuinely good people. The irony here might be that the unforeseen consequences of their actions undercut their vision of an effective American Lutheranism.

Who can be against merger? It’s like being against the flag, motherhood, baseball, and apple pie. Yet there are genuinely negative consequences to merger. While I am not much in the habit of quoting myself, for once I will break that rule to quote a paragraph I wrote some ten years ago on this very topic.

This romantic view of denominational history (the positive “urge to merge”) is greatly flawed, in that it pays no attention to the very real costs and problems associated with the process of consolidation and institutional realignment. Mergers are difficult to arrange, take

enormous amounts of time and energy, lead inevitably to hard feelings and disenchantment in some quarters, and generally expose the theological and ecclesiastical cracks that are endemic to American Lutheranism. Mergers upset the normal ties of loyalty and trust within denominations... The process of merger is, as well, ultimately internally directed, and inevitably draws resources away from evangelism and outreach.⁵

What is too often lost in merger is the group cohesion and trust, forged over decades of life together, and these forms of human capital are very difficult and time-consuming to rebuild—if they can be rebuilt at all. In the Lutheran case, the urge to merge reached its peak from the 1960s to the 1980s, just at the time when this human capital was sorely needed to ride above the massive social changes that were rocking American society. Right when we needed these bonds, we found that, partially because of merger, we no longer had them.

The urge to merge was a genuine part of our history together and per-

haps necessary or even inevitable in some sense. But the positive virtues of merger were so oversold that it became almost impossible to contemplate the downsides of merger or wonder about its negative side-effects. In our general rush to become one, we sowed some seeds of division, and in our hurry to bring a united Lutheran front to the world, we often became unresponsive, not only to our own people, but to the very world we sought to influence. *L*

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Notes

1. Franklin C. Fry, “Reaching Closer Relationships: The United Lutheran Church in America,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1/2 (1949): 165–8.
2. John H. Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1966), 154.
3. E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 539.
4. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
5. Mark Granquist, “Word Alone and the Future of Lutheran Denominationalism,” in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 62–3.

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